SI: Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies

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Between the Mundane and the Political: Women's Self-Representations on Instagram

Sofia P. Caldeira, Sander De Ridder, and Sofie Van Bauwel

Abstract

Women's self-representation on Instagram is often discussed in popular media in polarizing terms, as either an empowering practice or as boring and mundane. However, the political and the mundane are inevitably interwoven. This article grounds the discussions on how "the political" can be expressed through mundane Instagram practices on the analysis of individual self-representations of "ordinary" Instagram users (i.e., not celebrities or Insta-famous users). This research is based on a qualitative textual analysis of a sample of 77 randomly selected female Instagram users, ages 18–35, analyzing their photographic self-representations and its surrounding textual context—captions, comments, and likes. It explores how Instagram can broaden the scope of who and what is considered *photographable*, allowing for the representation of a wider variety of women and femininities underrepresented in popular media, and how this has the potential to upend hegemonic hierarchies of visibility. Following an Instagrammable aesthetic, these self-representations often take place in mundane contexts, as the photographable becomes extended to overlooked, yet essential, aspects of everyday life. It is in the context of these everyday self-representation practices that tangentially political themes become embedded, appearing in brief and often passing mentions that express self-worth, celebrate marginalized identities, or proclaim personal agency.

Keywords

Instagram, self-representation, mundane, everyday politics, social media, gender

Introduction

In recent years, Instagram has rapidly grown in popularity worldwide, reaching over 1 billion monthly active users in early 2018 (Constine, 2018). Instagram is an essential part of everyday social media use, but also of contemporary visual cultures. The platform has established new photographic conventions and aesthetic values (Manovich, 2017), which, as we will further explore in the article, help to define what is now considered as photo-worthy. By creating a broader range of cultural tastes, Instagram shapes the limits of what is visible and what remains unseen.

The creation and sharing of photographic self-representations are a central aspect of everyday social media practices (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 88). While most images shared on Instagram are not self-representations—that is, not including the users themselves (Tifentale & Manovich, 2014, p. 5)—popular and academic discussions about the platform are often centered on the idea of self-representation and the selfie phenomenon (Tiidenberg, 2018). Self-representation is often seen as embodying the ethos of social media (Thumim, 2012) and, as such, occupies a prominent place in our thinking around Instagram in contemporary cultural imaginaries.

In the tradition of cultural and media studies, we understand self-representation (rather than the performance-oriented term self-presentation) as a practice of symbolic creation of media texts (Rettberg, 2017). It relies on a series of fairly conscious creative choices, selecting particular aspects of one's life to be shared (Rettberg, 2017). Yet, the term also takes into consideration the everyday experiences of the individuals creating these images (Thumim, 2012, p. 8).

Young women, in particular, are often stereotypically associated with online self-representation and selfie-taking

Ghent University, Belgium

Corresponding Author:
Sofia P. Caldeira, Department of Communication Sciences, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Ghent University, Korte Meer 7-11, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.
Email: AnaSofia.PereiraCaldeira@UGent.be
Twitter: @sofiapcaldeira

(Burns, 2015). Not only are young women among the most active users of Instagram (WeAreSocial, 2018), but women have also been historically and culturally framed as "to-be-looked-at"—as a source of visual pleasure (Berger, 1972). As such, popular media regularly presents self-representation as a gendered phenomenon, framing it in often polarizing terms; either optimistically praising self-representation on Instagram as empowering (e.g., Fleischaue, 2014; McCarthy, 2013), or dismissing it as boring, mundane, and "basic" (e.g., Bloomingdale, 2015; Oyler, 2017).

Drawing on the scholarship on women's genres and their potential to show female points-of-view (Hermes, 2003; Kuhn, 1984), there is also a growing corpus of research into the gendered character of online self-representation (e.g., Burns, 2015), and on intentionally political uses and empowering self-representational practices (e.g., Retallack et al., 2016; Tiidenberg, 2018). However—in line with previous research on the negative consequences of Facebook use and other preceding image-based social media platforms—there is also research that points to potential dangers when it comes to Instagram use. Some studies relate Instagram use to increased tendencies for young women's self-objectification and greater body image concerns (e.g., Fardouly et al., 2017). Others link it to narcissism, self-promotion, and deceptive popularity-seeking strategies (e.g., Dumas et al., 2017), while others still frame it as bland, trivial, and repetitive (e.g., Le Moignan et al., 2017).

As Instagram self-representation practices become increasingly embedded in young people's everyday lives, they often become dismissed as *mundane*. The mundane is frequently conflated with the routines of everyday life, or even the ordinary (Ebrey, 2016). The term can carry a certain judgment of value, being defined by antithesis, as simply not extraordinary or novel (Inglis, 2005, p. 7). However, these mundane moments comprise the majority of our lives and are the backdrop to most of our aesthetic and political experiences (Melchionne, 2013). They are revealing of wider social forces and shared cultural practices (Inglis, 2005, p. 6). Yet, the mundane is also unique to each individual (Inglis, 2005, p. 13) and can be reflected in an array of diverse uses of Instagram, as will be further explored.

Mundane aspects of everyday life—breakfasts, artful lattes, outfits of the day—are ever-present features of this aesthetically oriented platform (Manovich, 2017, p. 73), in a recognition of their everyday aesthetic value and with the consequence of expanding the realm of the photographable (Okabe, 2004). It compels us to move beyond classically established aesthetic categories such as the beautiful or the sublime by opening spaces for more mundane categories such as the interesting or the cute (Ngai, 2010). Through a particular Instagrammable aesthetic, which privileges those aspects of the everyday deemed to look particularly good on Instagram and likely to attract positive feedback (Caldeira, 2020), self-representations can thus showcase its creators' lifestyles—expressing both individual tastes and socio-cultural distinctions, through a series of mundane choices (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 57).

However, as mentioned earlier, self-representation practices on Instagram can also be understood as potentially empowering practices (Tiidenberg, 2018), thus carrying a certain everyday political potential. As it will be further expanded, our understanding of the political in the context of Instagram practices cannot be limited to the realm of conventional "Politics" and governmental practices. Rather, it needs to be more broadly conceived as expressed through personal experiences and interests (Mouffe, 2005). Everyday politics on Instagram emerge not only through those deliberate efforts of hashtag activism (e.g., Highfield, 2016), or online fourth-wave feminist campaigns (e.g., Maclaran, 2015; Munro, 2013). It also surfaces in less direct ways, by showcasing diverse representations of femininities, and displaying a variety of mundane everyday lives, often underrepresented on traditional mainstream media.

Yet, despite the deep entanglement of the mundane aspects of Instagram practices and its everyday political potential, there is still a tendency to treat the political and the mundane as essentially distinct and isolated aspects of self-representation—on the one hand, feminist body-positive selfies, on the other hand, aestheticized avocado on toast. This article aims to explore the complexities of everyday self-representation practices on Instagram. Drawing on Silverstone (1994a), we recognize that it is on the level of the ordinary and the everyday that individuals enter conversations with broader conventions and hegemonic systems. Through their self-representations, these young women are, inevitably, negotiating with wider social structures and imaginaries, placing their own images alongside a dominant visual culture, thereby negotiating their own belonging (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 96).

By complicating the distinctions between mundane and political, this article aims to add to the existing scholarship on Instagram and gendered self-representation practices, broadening the scope of research on how socio-cultural power dynamics can be experienced in mundane social media contexts. It does so by grounding these theoretical considerations on an empirical analysis of Instagram self-representation made by "ordinary" young women (i.e., not celebrities, Insta-famous users, or influencers). While focusing on "special" cases, such as celebrities or influencers, and on their self-branding strategies (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013, 2015) can help to make the political aspect of Instagram more explicit, this article recognizes that the vast majority of people using Instagram are those we could consider "ordinary" users; most of their photographic production takes place in relatively ordinary everyday settings.

Drawing on a feminist media studies perspective, we approach socially and culturally significant issues of gender through the exploration of the emergent forms of gendered self-representation afforded by Instagram. These

self-representations made by "ordinary" women may not be deliberately political in themselves. Yet, they rely on a, perhaps unconscious, assertion of value—deeming these young women and these mundane moments as worthy of being photographed, of being shared online, of being aesthetically admired (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 81). Self-representation can act as an affirmation of visibility, that can be extended to the wide variety of women who comprise Instagram's user base, representing diverse identities and femininities often absent from popular media. Self-representation on Instagram thus has a tangential political potential by virtue of broadening the scope of visibility and of who and what can be considered as *photographable* (Bourdieu, 1965).

Everyday Political Potential and Mundane Self-Representations

While "Politics" is no doubt present in social media, when focusing on everyday self-representation on Instagram, it becomes important to think beyond the practical level of governmental institutions, politicians, elections, and other legislative practices that regulate a nation or community. As mentioned earlier, a broader conception of "*the political*" (Mouffe, 2005) is then necessary, allowing us to focus on the ways personal experiences and interests—such as lifestyle or appearance—can be understood as politicized, shaping society not through decrees or laws, but rather "from below" (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 38–40).

Yet, often research on social media still essentially distinguishes between those forms of social media production concerned with discernibly political topics—such as conversations about elections, hashtag activism, or even social media-driven revolutions like the Arab Spring—and those centered on essentially personal and mundane topics that end up comprising most of "ordinary" users' regularly shared content—such as photos from night-outs with friends, pets, or selfies (Highfield, 2016, p. 3). The distinction between *personal* and *political* made by these authors (e.g., Highfield, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015) might offer some conceptual clarity. However, they recognize that in everyday life this distinction is not as easy to make, as the personal and the political are often intertwined. Self-representations on Instagram can thus have a tangentially political character, not deliberately addressing "Political" themes, but rather incidentally shedding light on social or political topics through everyday or mundane social media practices (Highfield, 2016).

As Silverstone (1994a, pp. 996–998) states, it is in the realm of the everyday and the ordinary that individuals enter into "conversations" with hegemonic power structures, engaging with them or opposing them, although not always consciously, through their own personal everyday practices—among them, nowadays, their social media use and self-representation practices. This is echoed in the feminist belief that "the personal is political," which understands individual problems, present in women's everyday lives, as being related to larger social forces and, thus, political (Whittier, 2017, p. 377). As such, self-representations on Instagram, no matter how mundane in their visual aspect, have the political potential to generate visibility for identities that are often overlooked in popular media (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 95). The sheer presence on Instagram of such a wide variety of individuals—with distinct gender presentations, races, sexual orientations, and so on—can have an everyday political character, clashing with, and disrupting dominant narratives (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 99–100).

This research is based on a qualitative textual analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) of a sample of 77 "ordinary" Instagram users. This sample departed from four users randomly selected from the researchers' personal following base on Instagram (subsequently eliminated from the final studied sample), and was expanded through a snowball sampling strategy. From each of these four initial users we randomly selected other four users they followed, and so forth. This process was repeated until we reached the final number of 77 users, thus expanding and diversifying the sample beyond the researchers' own networks. Given our theoretical interest in gendered practices of self-representation on Instagram and its aforementioned stereotypical association with young women, all selected participants were female, with ages ranging between 18 and 35 years old, as these are among the predominant active users of Instagram (WeAreSocial, 2018) and the demographic stereotypically associated with intense self-representation and selfie-taking (Burns, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018). All research participants had (at the time of data collection) public profiles, and were contacted through Instagram Direct Message, informed about the research, and openly agreed to participate. To ensure their privacy, no usernames are referenced in this article.

In total, 20 photographic self-representations (posted between 2016 and early 2018) were randomly selected for each user, totalling 1512 analyzed posts. For this analysis, self-representation was understood in a broader sense, not limited to selfies or self-taken photographs. Self-representation also includes photos that only show a part of the users' bodies, or photographs of the users themselves, taken by other people (e.g., their friends) but published through their *own* Instagram accounts. These photographs are understood as a form of self-representation because of the curatorial agency involved in the users' choice to share them (Rettberg, 2014, p. 40). As this research focuses solely on self-representation, all images that did not include the users themselves were excluded from the analysis.

A coding frame, with a set of categories and respective codes, was created by combining insights from a previous literature review (focusing on questions of media representation, gender and femininity, social media, and feminist scholarship) with insights that emerged from the familiarization with the data. Following an initial close reading (Ruiz de Castilla, 2017), all users and selected posts—including both

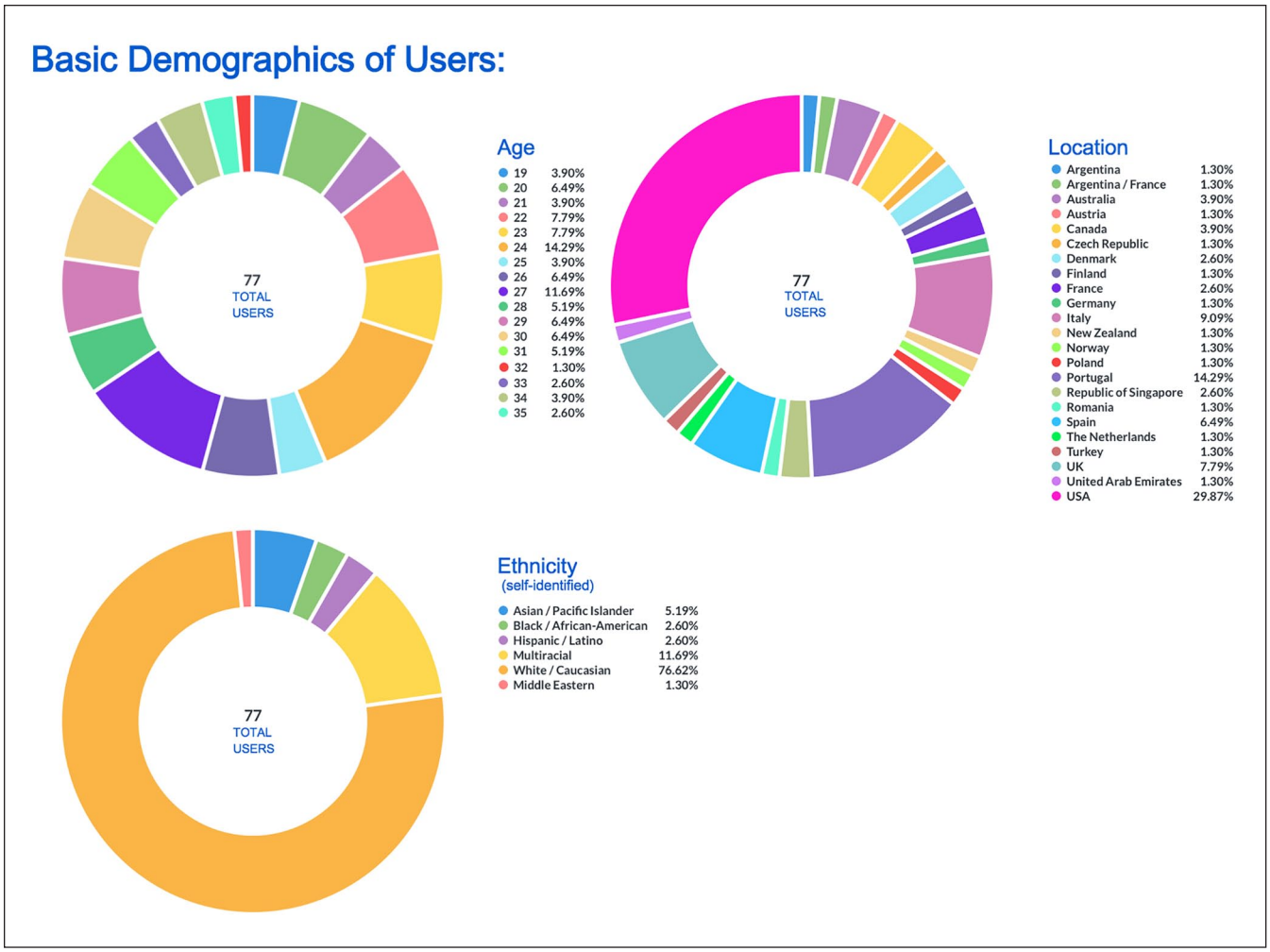

Figure 1. Basic demographics of users.

the images themselves and the surrounding textual context: captions, comments, and likes—were coded. We analyzed the users' demographics and general usage metrics, the metrics of each post, the technical and discursive strategies used in captions (such as use of hashtags or username tags, presence of political discourses, or discourses on gender and physical appearance), the formal characteristics of the photos (such as color, framing scale, perceived use of filters and photo enhancement, or type of moment photographed), and the characteristics of the people represented in the photos (such as their perceived gender, race, body type, pose, facial expression, clothing, and make-up, etc.).

These data were later critically interpreted. We recorded our interpretations and questions in analytic memos, identified and categorized emerging themes and concepts, and subsequently used connecting strategies to create links between the emerging insights (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). Furthermore, we confronted the pre-existing debates in the field with our data.

The aforementioned tangential political potential of otherwise mundane self-representations is noticeable in the sample of 77 participants whose profiles and self-representations were analyzed for this research. These randomly selected "ordinary" women help to showcase the potential for diversity that Instagram self-representations (and, more broadly, user-generated self-representations on other social media platforms too) can have—including women who, inevitably, do not necessarily fit the narrow and exclusionary ideal of young, White, thin, seemingly heterosexual, conventionally feminine and attractive women that seems to dominate popular mass media representations (Gill, 2007, p. 12). The participants ranged from 23 different countries, spread mainly across Europe, but also from North America, Oceania, and with a few users from Asia. While most women in the sample identified as White, there was also considerable racial diversity, with nearly a quarter of the participants claiming other ethnic backgrounds. Many of those identified as multiracial, some proudly declaring their diverse ancestry dating back several generations. Others still identified as Asian, Black, Hispanic, and one of the users as Middle-Eastern (see Figure 1).

Our analysis reveals a remarkable sense of individual diversity, which is reflected in strikingly different representations of femininities. Representations that closely adhered to the stereotypical hyper-feminine ideals often promoted by traditional mainstream media (Matschiner & Murnen, 1999) only comprised 17% of all studied representations, roughly the same proportion of highly androgynous representations. Most self-representations in the sample showcased more moderate and individualized expressions of femininity. These representations offer images of femininities frequently under or misrepresented in popular media, subverting normative expectations by showcasing multi-layered representations of the participants' lives. Among the users, a young Portuguese woman flaunted her numerous tattoos and brightly colored green hair in affectionate photos with her friends and family. A singer-songwriter of African American and Mexican descent shared playful photos of her musical practice, posting images of her concerts and studio sessions while simultaneously celebrating her natural hair and LGBTQ+ identity. Or a Russian-born beauty professional and naturopath living in Milan promoted a healthy, natural-based lifestyle alongside highly idealized and photoshopped images of herself as a self-proclaimed "Russian Barbie."

While most users' body-types (as perceived by the researchers while coding) could be seen as fitting on the thinner side of the body-size spectrum, there where nonetheless some exceptions showcasing underrepresented body-types, such as participants exhibiting their muscular bodies, flexing their arms at the camera, or plus-size women posing for mirror selfies, showing off their outfits and proclaiming their "selfie love." Likewise, still somewhat unconventional beauty markers like tattoos, piercings, unnaturally colored hair were also visible in about 8% of the coded posts. And despite the common association between Instagram and the use of filters and photo-editing tools (Manovich, 2017, p. 73), many self-representations showed not only picture-ready made-up faces but also photos with no obvious editing, showing off bruises, dark circles under eyes, wrinkles and aging lines, blemishes, and other common attributes often dismissed as "flaws" or "imperfections" by the unachievable photoshopped standards of much of traditional media (Engeln-Maddox, 2006).

These participants also had diverse professional occupations, ranging not only from those occupations which receive frequent media attention—such as models, aspiring influencers and lifestyle bloggers, artists, or personal trainers and yoga instructors—to occupations not so commonly acknowledged in media outlets—such as medical pathologists, teachers, university students, bartenders, and so on. Such diverse occupations and focuses of interest were naturally reflected in the participants' diverse ways of using Instagram. For example, while some of the studied accounts shared mostly work-related content, other accounts were so heavily dominated by personal content that those users' professions were difficult to discern. Some accounts privileged the celebration of personal relationships and were populated by photos in which the users were surrounded by their friends and families. Others took the guise of travel diaries, documenting trips and holidays, or of outfit diaries, expressing the user's sartorial tastes and inventiveness.

Self-representation also had different weight and significance for different participants. While in some accounts there was an extremely high density of self-representation—as in the remarkable example of a 19-year-old Spanish university student, whose profile almost exclusively comprised photos where she figured, except for one single photo of her dog—others privileged photos of objects, landscapes, or other people, rarely sharing their own direct self-representations. However, as mentioned earlier, and in line with previous research (Tifentale & Manovich, 2014), for most users in the analyzed sample, self-representations were not the most shared posts and there was a certain balance between the number of self-representations shared and those photographs including only other people or objects—averaging about 4 self-representations per every 10 posts made. Yet, self-representation is still a central part of everyday social media use (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 88), illustrative of how everyday aesthetics and everyday politics can converge in the creation of images of the self.

As ordinary everyday practices (Silverstone, 1994a), these self-representations are grounded in multiple personal experiences and on the autobiographical, thus resisting universalizing readings. There is no single, monolithic way of using Instagram; rather, we observed a large variation in how individuals manage Instagram conventions for many diverse representations of femininities. All these small mundane choices and individual variation in Instagram self-representation can be understood as tangentially political, as it implies a wide range of "ordinary" people taking active control over strategies of representation, choosing which aspects of their everyday lives to showcase, how to represent them, and how they wish to be seen in the world (Thumim, 2012, p. 91).

These diverse practices of Instagram self-representation can, in a way, be understood as akin to an, often unconscious, expression of visibility politics (Whittier, 2017). Visibility politics aims not at directly changing policies or laws. Rather, by making the individual experiences of potentially marginalized identities visible, it aims at gradual cultural change—changing subjectivities, beliefs, and feelings, by normalizing and making these identities a familiar presence in everyday environments (Whittier, 2017, pp. 376–377).

Katrin Tiidenberg (2018) briefly explores how visibility politics can play a role on Instagram. Instagram introduces the potential for these self-representations to become visible among an enormous audience (Tiidenberg, 2018, pp. 33–34). By bypassing the gatekeepers of traditional media production, self-representations claim the symbolic privilege of defining who has the right to be seen and the terms of such visibility (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 87). Even if not created as a deliberate political statement, every self-representation

shared relies on the underlying (and often unconscious) judgment that *this photo, this moment, this person* is worthy of being seen, appreciated, and shared online (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 81).

The women in our sample—the young university student, the mom sharing her fitness progress, the queer fashion designer, and so on—represent a shift from those limited representations of women traditionally present in popular mass media. Their simple presence in the public panorama of social media, their diverse appearances and the varied little slices of everyday life they share, represents a, perhaps small but nonetheless significant, disruption to the hierarchies that have for years defined who was worthy of public visibility. As such, these representations broaden the range of what is visible beyond pre-established beauty ideals and diversify our collective visual culture (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 87). This can act as a form of "everyday activism" (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012) potentiating not only eventual social change, by shifting cultural attitudes toward often unseen identities, but, perhaps mainly, by deepening a sense of personal agency and empowerment among the young women sharing these self-representations.

As such, to a certain extent, the political potential of mundane self-representation on Instagram can also be read in the light of the idea of an online-based fourth-wave of feminism (e.g., Chamberlain, 2017; Maclaran, 2015; Munro, 2013), as it will be further developed in the final section of this article. While we should be cautious not to overestimate the political potential of these practices, avoiding falling in the same feminist techno-utopias of earlier internet research (Sveningsson Elm, 2009, pp. 243–244), there can be still a sense of cautious optimism brought by this widening of possibilities.

Self-Representation on Instagram as a Mundane Everyday Practice

The noticeable everydayness and mundane character of many of these individual self-representation practices reflect the recent changes brought by digital photography and social media platforms like Instagram onto the concept of *the photographable*. For Pierre Bourdieu (1965), the photographable refers not to the seemingly endless range of objects, people, and moments that are *technically* possible to be captured by the camera, but rather to those that are considered as being *worthy* of being photographed in a specific socio-cultural context. The photographable is thus imbued by the social, aesthetic, and ethical values and cultural conventions of a particular time and context, privileging certain subjects, genres, compositions, poses, and styles. As such, it always implies a, often unconscious, judgment of value, deeming some people and some moments worthy of visibility, while disregarding others. In this light, the photographable can be understood as akin to a sort of photographic *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977)—influencing and limiting the choices

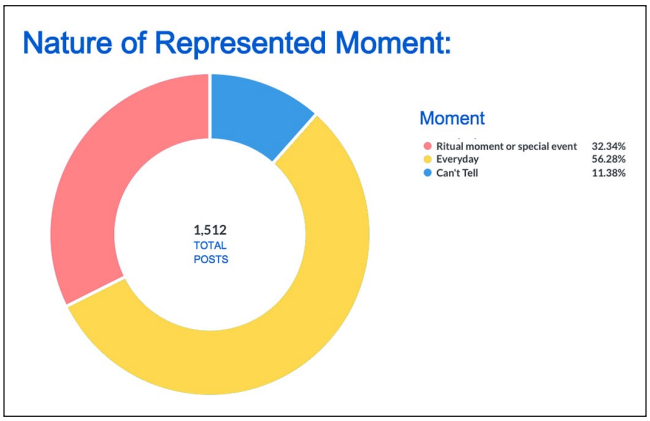

Figure 2. Nature of Represented Moment.

seemingly available to the photographer, while still allowing for a degree of individual variation and agency, as individuals respond to ever-changing situations and improvise within the limits of these conventions and values. The photographable is thus in a constant process of shaping individual practices, while simultaneously being shaped by them.

Writing in the 1960s, in the context of analogue snapshot culture, Bourdieu (1965) conceptualized the photographable as privileging the realm of the ritual and of idealized leisure time with family and friends. These ritual leisurely moments are still present on Instagram today, and nearly a third of all the analyzed self-representations were created in moments that could be considered a ritual (see Figure 2).

One of the participants posed with two of her friends, holding her diploma and wearing an embellished laurel crown, typical of Italian graduation ceremonies. Another participant posts a professionally taken photograph of her wedding, formally posing in a church, alongside her groom and in-laws; or a couple on holiday romantically pose and kiss on a picturesque Venice bridge. Many of these photographs also adhere to the visual conventions of traditional snapshots—often being taken by someone else (rather than selfies), with the subject deliberately posing and smiling for the camera, and typically in medium or wide framings that show not only the subject but some of the enveloping context.

However, co-existing with these ritualized photos are also myriad self-representations, created in mundane contexts, which comprise the majority of the analyzed images. The predominance of these everyday images can be understood in the light of the changes brought by digital and mobile phone photography, which significantly reduced the costs of photographic production. Also, the incorporation of the camera into mobile devices ensures the constant possibility of photographing in everyday life. These changes allowed for an expansion of the range of objects and moments deemed as *photographable*, embracing the visually interesting or unusual in day-to-day life (Okabe, 2004, p. 2), expanding the aesthetic appreciation to the realm of

the everyday and broadening it to more mundane aesthetic categories (Ngai, 2010).

These Instagram self-representations, created in everyday contexts, show mundane moments, often overlooked in vernacular photography history. One of the participants shares a smiling selfie, showing off her dirty oil-covered hands, celebrating her achievement of having successfully changed her own car's brake pads. In such ways, the private realm of the domestic is brought into the public eye of Instagram, with users sharing photos of themselves on a lazy weekend, watching a movie in bed with their cat, and so on.

As Instagram brings the mundane to the fore, the participants' tastes and preferences are also expressed through their photos of everyday consumption and lifestyle choices. Everyday consumption can become a creative and symbolic act on Instagram, helping to express, emphasize, and reify certain aspects of the users' personalities, deemed as particularly desirable (Silverstone, 1994b, p. 115). Some participants frame themselves as #gamergirls, sharing photos of their hands holding their latest video-game purchases, or others flaunt their dietary choices by, for example, playfully posing in restaurants in front of their food.

Although authenticity is claimed as a central principle of social media practices—emphasizing the "transparent" sharing of everyday life and "just being yourself" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60)—there is still a certain degree, not necessarily conscious, of strategic self-representation involved in these expressions of lifestyles and preferences that can be linked to the academic debate on self-branding online (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013, 2015). These practices, previously mainly associated with celebrities, get adopted by "ordinary" Instagram users as they craft an "edited self," strategically revealing only certain aspects of their personal lives that fit with the desired lifestyle or "brand" (Marwick, 2013, p. 15).

In some cases, these self-representations of everyday consumption and lifestyle choices can also serve as a way to express and assert the participants' *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1986), in a diffuse and symbolic manner, embodied in their cultural consumption tastes (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). A selfie while wearing a "Stranger Things" baseball cap signals appreciation for the show. Photos posing with friends in the middle of concert venues show their enjoyment of the live shows. Or photos of participants posing holding books and music records expressed their cultural capital in the "objectified state" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Everyday consumption of certain goods—like clothing, fashion accessories, food, and so on.—becomes enmeshed with individualized lifestyles and personal narratives (Banet-Weiser, 2012). These participants use these relatively ordinary choices as ways to symbolically express not only of their tastes but also of their cultural knowledge, skills, and achievements. These ordinary practices serve as a space for the creation and expression of social and cultural distinctions, enacting judgments of value, and thus engaging in a "politics of status" (Silverstone, 1994a, p. 994). In the context of Instagram, the recognition of the symbolic value of this "status" can also be linked to the importance of quantified popularity metrics, such as the number of followers or likes (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). As such, these strategies of self-branding tend to prioritize attention and visibility, creating representations that aim to generate more positive feedback and popularity (Marwick, 2013, p. 140).

Instagram's openness to the mundane seems also to showcase an expansion of what Bourdieu (1965, pp. 35–36) dubbed as a "touristic attitude" into the realm of the everyday—casting a new gaze over the ordinary, breaking the inattentive familiarity with the everyday and turning it into a potential source of *the photographable*, worthy of aesthetic admiration. This "touristic attitude" is sometimes overtly recognized by the participants themselves—as exemplified by an Italian vegan blogger and engineering student who shared a photo of herself photographing a beautifully arranged table full of vegan food, accompanied by a long and self-reflexive caption where she muses on how her desire to take better photos for Instagram has led her to "start seeing the world from a different perspective," paying more attention to the minute details of everyday and finding beauty in them. This expansion of the photographable can, thus, be understood as tangentially political in itself, extending the realm of the visible and granting value to a wider range of moments and people otherwise unseen.

Instagrammable Aestheticization of Everyday Life

As mentioned earlier, Instagram is usually perceived as an aesthetically oriented social media platform, encouraging a careful curation of everyday life, and making filters and other simple photo-editing tools widely accessible (Manovich, 2017, p. 73). Recognizing the value in everyday aesthetics (Leddy, 2005), Instagram expands the scope of aesthetic experiences beyond the traditional domain of the artistic, incorporating the quotidian and mundane experiences of the home-life, workplace, food consumption, clothing, entertainment, and so on (Leddy, 2005, p. 3). This contemporary expansion of the realm of aesthetics opens up the possibility for more mundane aesthetic categories, such as the cute or the interesting, manifest in everyday life and linked to consumption and domesticity (Ngai, 2010). In this context, these mundane moments of daily life itself can be reframed in terms of a specifically *Instagrammable aesthetic*, carefully considering lifestyles, experiences, and objects in terms of their visual and aesthetic characteristics, privileging certain contexts as particularly desirable according to their ability to look good on Instagram and attract likes (Caldeira, 2020).

Everyday objects and moments can thus be presented in an Instagrammable manner, following well-established visual conventions, such as, for example, the use

of "flat-lays" (carefully staged compositions of objects, sometimes featuring the hands or feet of the photographers, photographed from above), or of laboriously framed photographs of details of the users' bodies (such as hands holding objects, or feet against a beautiful floor), or even candid-looking, yet highly stylized, photos of the users in mundane settings, as in a coffee shop or bookstore (Manovich, 2017, pp. 105–106). This Instagrammable staging of an aestheticized everyday life is thus a practice that might require considerable efforts such as careful styling, framing, lighting, and editing to ensure that the images fit the desired aesthetic (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 5).

Echoing the stereotypical association of self-representation on Instagram as a gendered, feminine activity (Burns, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018), currently the most popular lifestyle Instagrammers, who contribute to the popularization of Instagrammable aesthetics, are young women (Buxton, 2017). As such, this Instagrammable aesthetic can also take on gendered articulations. The focus on the everyday and personal life echoes the subjects often associated with women's genres (Hermes, 2003, p. 2). Some of the aesthetic conventions popularly deemed as Instagrammable—such as light and bright photographs, pastel tones, carefully curated shots—also echo some of the characteristics that have ordinarily been associated with femininity and women artists—such as delicacy, nuance, subtlety, and so on (Nochlin, 1988, pp. 148–149). Likewise, many of the subjects popular on Instagram—fashion, beauty, fitness, and so on—parallel concerns stereotypically associated with women, and link back to the historical associations of women as "to-be-looked-at" and aesthetically admired (Berger, 1972).

We noticed in the analyzed sample that there are various aspects of daily life and diverse lifestyles that can be represented by an Instagrammable aesthetic. Domestic home-life can be represented in extremely idealized ways, that echo careful self-branding strategies (Marwick, 2013), as in a photograph by an Austrian lifestyle blogger, posing in a perfectly styled bedroom, smiling, with her eyes closed while enjoying a coffee in bed. While still admitting, in her caption, that this was a staged photo from another moment, and that she was actually, at the time, working on her blog while wearing #nomakeup and #nohairstyle—in an effort to maintain a sense of authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 17). Similarly, work could also be shown in an Instagrammable light, for example by sharing curated flat-lays of their #girlbossoffice, juxtaposing the participant's hand holding a gold-embellished mug over a display of matching golden office supplies.

Everyday consumption is also frequently showcased in a recognizable Instagrammable aesthetic, with users sharing photos of their hands, while holding a beautifully crafted, and perfectly Instagrammable, ice cream cone, shaped as a multi-colored rose; or posing for a portrait while holding a rustic matcha cup. Everyday consumption is, in this way, turned into a productive visual creation tool, allowing for the production of Instagram content (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

In the studied sample, feminine efforts—those efforts of beautification and body improvement often expected of women and promoted in certain women's genres, such as women's magazines (Gill, 2007)—were also represented according to the same gendered Instagrammable aesthetic. For example, selfies with faces covered in a green clay mask frame these beautification efforts as a leisurely weekend activity and self-pampering. These photos are often carefully framed and aesthetically considered, as exemplified in a photo of a Los Angeles musician flaunting her #nailsofInstagram, the pink of her finger and toenails perfectly coordinated with the pink laptop keyboard and the pink flowers on the blue duvet.

Fashion and outfit posts were also particularly Instagrammable, some users sharing staged photos taken by either friends or professional photographers—as, for example, with a teacher and blogger from the United States posing in front of a patterned tile background in light blue tones, matching her blue striped shirt, in a careful aesthetic reminiscent of fashion magazines' editorials. Or, again following Instagram conventions, posting a top-down outfit selfie that shows only a detail of her torso, legs, and feet standing over a bright white floor.

But not only those seemingly ordinary aspects of everyday life lend themselves to being represented according to this often mundane Instagrammable aesthetic. Even ritual and leisurely moments—such as holidays, travels, or celebrations—can be dissociated from their snapshot-inspired visual conventions and reframed to fit the same aesthetic. Photos with family and friends, celebrating these personal relationships, forgo the formal posing and instead take the shape of playful selfies—with subjects pulling funny faces or blowing kisses at the camera, or embellishing their images with Snapchat-like fantasy filters, for example adding flower crowns to their heads. Photographs of leisurely summer moments are made Insta-worthy by posing in infinity pools, or by incorporating Instagrammable unicorn-shaped pool floaters. And even ritual holidays can get reframed by focusing on small mundane details, as with a user who shows her enthusiasm for the upcoming Christmas season by photographing her legs and feet while standing over a Christmas-themed doormat.

The widespread and significance of this Instagrammable aesthetic is occasionally recognized by the participants themselves. In one of her captions, the Austrian lifestyle blogger referred earlier, playfully recognizes the constructed and aestheticized nature of her breakfast flat-lays, admitting that she "stole" her boyfriend's coffee for a "cute morning picture," which she then arranged over her bed next to a bright fruit and yogurt bowl and two mini-Polaroid photographs of herself. The importance of an Instagrammable aesthetic is sometimes also openly linked in these posts to a valorization of logic of quantified popularity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) by emphasizing the importance of accumulating followers and likes. While discussing her "best-nine" collage post (created

by a popular website which selects the nine photographs with more likes in a certain year), a participant from Boston commented that the photos from her Iceland trip had not made it to the "top," and humorously remarked that she needed to go back and climb the photogenic Icelandic glaciers, as this would have "more like-appeal." These tongue-in-cheek comments and captions thus expose the ways in which these pictures are produced, showing the users' reflexive awareness of the Instagrammable aesthetics and conventions. At the same time, these humorous comments and captions allow users to distance themselves, in a playful way, from the aesthetic conventions of Instagram.

Finding the Political in Mundane Self-Representations

As it was explored earlier, the mundane and the political are never clearly distinct entities. Although overt politics were not at the core of most analyzed posts, there were still, in the studied sample, some posts that directly and unequivocally showed a personal engagement with distinctively political activities (Highfield, 2016, p. 2)—such as a selfie taken by a North-American participant showing off a "I voted" sticker on her lapel; or a photo of a UK-based participant's red shoes accompanied by a caption reminding her followers to "Vote RED," showing her support for the Labour Party. Other participants, for example, shared posts celebrating International Women's Day, accompanied by motivational captions and feminist hashtags, such as #wearestrongertogether or #femaleempowerment. Some shared photos of themselves, alone or with friends, at their local Pride Parade, showing their belonging to the LGBTQ community or expressing their support as straight allies. Also, more conservatively oriented participants overtly expressed their political views, as exemplified by a post by a Russian beauty professional living in Milan, who shared a photo of herself posing in front of a magazine cover which showed Vladimir Putin as a manipulative puppet-master, accompanying it with a caption stating "#PutinismyCSAR."

These deliberately politicized self-representations can be linked to the notion of an emerging, and increasingly popular, fourth-wave of feminism (e.g., Chamberlain, 2017; Maclaran, 2015; Munro, 2013). Fourth-wave feminism can be understood as a contemporary resurgence of interest in feminist ideas and discourses (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 1). Drawing from feminist history, the fourth-wave maintains second-wave ideas of consciousness-raising through the sharing of personal experiences (Aitken, 2017, pp. 6–7), as well as a third-wave focus on micro-politics of the everyday and concerns with intersectionality, allowing for the co-existence of multiple feminisms (Maclaran, 2015, pp. 1732–1735). However, the main particularity of fourth-wave feminism is its adoption of online potentialities, particularly those of social media, for new modes of dissemination of information, participation and engagement (Chamberlain, 2017). Social media allows for a quicker mobilization of activists throughout the globe (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 107–108), and for a large variety of previously marginalized groups of people to claim a voice and share their own self-representations (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 4). Although the validity of this fourth-wave is still a topic of academic debate—for example, concerning whether the adoption of online technologies is enough to claim a new era (Munro, 2013, p. 23)—the idea has unequivocally entered the cultural imaginary and is claimed by many young feminists (Chamberlain, 2017). As such, the notion of fourth-wave feminism is valuable to our understanding of the political potential of Instagram, even if not always consciously a part of these social media practices.

Drawing on the feminist idea that "the personal is political" (Whittier, 2017, p. 377), some participants take advantage of Instagram as a platform to share their personal experiences of gendered problems, to create wider social recognition and potentially lead to political action (Aitken, 2017, pp. 6–7). Some used their self-representations as a way to share personal stories of fighting and recovering from eating disorders—showing before and after photos of their recovery, alongside long personal captions and tagging these posts with multiple hashtags seeking to create awareness, such as #healthybodyimage, or #eatingdisorderawareness. Another user, an Australian illustrator, shared a selfie of her bruised and swollen face after being assaulted at a music festival, recounting her experience of facing sexual and physical assault, and of seeking legal justice. These extremely personal stories were shared as a way of creating awareness, a sense of community, and to help others that might have gone through similar experiences. And these posts were often praised in their comments as being inspirational and empowering.

However, these overtly and deliberately political posts—with open references to Political issues, feminist discourses, concerns over representation, equality, and so on—rarely figured in the analyzed sample, comprising less than 2% of all studied self-representations. For the most part, overt politics did not seem to be at the core of most participants' Instagram practices. This does not mean, however, that these posts are devoid of political potential. Rather that more tangentially political issues and themes can seep into the everyday social media use (Highfield, 2016, p. 3) of the studied participants, appearing in brief and often passing mentions in these otherwise mundane self-representations.

Figure 3 represents political discourses in captions.

These tangentially political concerns emerge from these self-representations following the same mundane Instagrammable framings and aesthetics previously explored. By employing particular self-love discourses (Gill & Elias, 2014) in their captions, selfies, visually identical to many other selfies, can be framed as vehicles for the expression of acceptance of one's own appearance, even when this appearance has some characteristics usually described as "flaws"

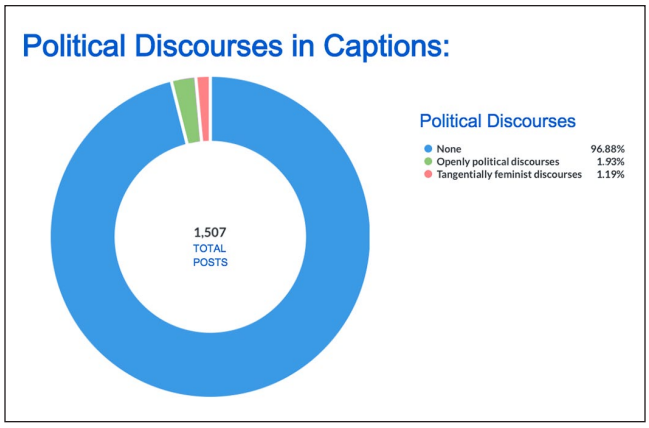

Figure 3. Political discourses in captions.

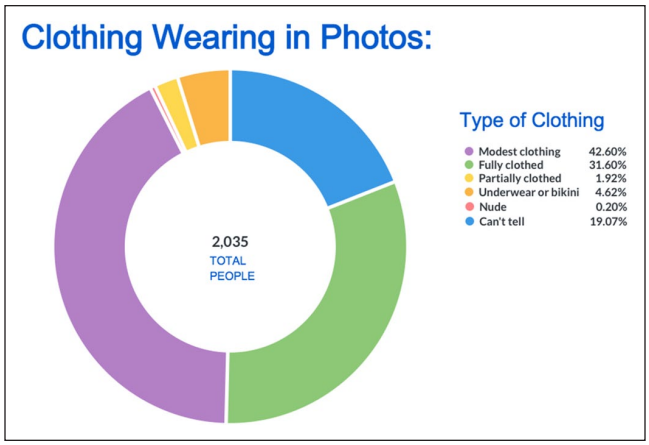

Figure 4. Clothing wearing in photos.

by popular media—as with a selfie by a 35-year-old Spanish women professing her love for her visible freckles, wrinkles, and dark circles.

Making clear that there is no "universal female experience" (often equated in traditional media with a generic, unmarked notion of a white body; hooks, 1992, pp. 123–124), personal identity issues also become entangled with tangentially political discourses, as participants use their self-representations to proudly celebrate their often marginalized identities. A UK-based user posted selfies expressing her "#Zimbabwe excitement" and celebrating #blackgirlmagic. And in the United States, a Black-Japanese visual artist shared a self-portrait, delicately posing in her underwear and flaunting her curly, natural hair, as a call to her followers to love their dark skin and "post pictures of their unapologetic blackness." Relatively mundane photographs, such as a picnic with a group of fellow lifestyle bloggers, were accompanied by hashtags that emphasize the user's blackness in a usually White-dominated sphere, such as #blackgirlswhoblog. Or a photo of an African American/Mexican singer-songwriter performing at a live show complemented by hashtags that celebrate not only her #blackexcellence but also her queerness, identifying as #gayaf, using Instagram self-representation to express various intersections between gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Despite the relatively low number of participants identifying as Black or as multiracial (see Figure 1), the celebration of Blackness and of diverse ethnical origins was noteworthy in the analyzed sample. Frequently, these celebrations of blackness emerged in mundane contexts, as in portraits accompanied by hashtags appreciating their #naturalhair, or in travel selfies hashtagged #blackgirltravel. As Papacharissi notes, this resource to hashtags helps mundane self-representations to acquire a political character, including these posts in a searchable, publicly accessible, wider conversation, thus allowing the private and the everyday to enter the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 107–110). As such, these posts create public visibility for facets of the experiences of people of color that are often overlooked in popular media. They can be tangentially understood as an expression of a, perhaps often unconscious, "oppositional gaze," which relies on a wish to change the structures of cultural production, creating alternative representations Black female subjectivity (hooks, 1992, p. 128).

These tangentially political discourses not only incorporate the ethos fourth-wave of feminism (Chamberlain, 2017; Maclaran, 2015; Munro, 2013) but are also tempered by contemporary *postfeminist sensibilities* (Gill, 2016). Unlike earlier conceptions of postfeminism (e.g., Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), these contemporary sensibilities are no longer marked by an open dismissal and contempt for feminist ideals, rejecting them as out-of-date and no longer needed. Rather, contemporary postfeminism is able to rebrand feminism in terms of personal empowerment and choice, discourses of individualism and personal agency, and equating fashion, beauty, sexiness, and bodily display with empowerment (Gill, 2016, p. 613).

Full, or even partial, nudity was rare in the analyzed sample, accounting for less than 2% of the people represented in all studied posts (see Figure 4). These photos were often framed in an aestheticized and artistic manner, devoid of open political critique, illustrating, for example, holidays when the participants just so happen to swim nude. Yet, these nude photos still unwittingly pushed the boundaries of Instagram's tendentious nudity policies, which tend to disproportionally police women's bodies (e.g., Caldeira et al., 2018). And some participants deliberately used their images to criticize these Instagram policies—as with one post shared by a Los Angeles-based model, which showed a professional fashion editorial photograph of herself and another female model, posing wearing an open fur coat, revealing her nude torso and her underpants. Her exposed nipple was covered by a small star emoji, in an effort to circumvent the female-nipple ban of Instagram, and her caption defiantly declared, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but

reporting nipples will never hurt me." These declarations echo other popular fourth-wave feminist hashtag movements to expose everyday sexism, particularly in the context of Instagram and social media, such as the #freethenipple campaign (Matich et al., 2018). Nonetheless, they still carry an underlying postfeminist ideal that equates bodily display as being a sign of strength, independence, and empowerment (Burns, 2015, p. 197).

Reflecting broader fourth-wave concerns with restrictive beauty ideals and hegemonic notions of femininity (Retallack et al., 2016), there were also general tones of body positivity (Cwynar-Horta, 2016) and "love your body" discourses (Gill & Elias, 2014) in some of the studied self-representations. Some participants accompanied their self-representations with long personal and motivational captions, encouraging followers to accept themselves and to love their bodies, tagging posts as #bodypositive or #self-empowerment. Perhaps paradoxically, these love your body discourses often accompanied posts that sought to encourage a certain "healthy" lifestyle, combining, for example, advice on a vegan diet or fitness routines, with self-confidence encouragement. Fitness, in particular, was often reframed in empowering tones, not as an effort of body improvement and compliance to social norms of beauty, but rather as a source of body love. Photos of the participants while engaging in exercise or post-workout selfies are shared as a celebration of self-love and as a quest for personal improvement, seemingly seeking to become #strongnotskinny.

However, these posts can also combine these #everyBODYisbeautiful messages with contradictory, and sometimes harsh postfeminist messages on the importance of achieving a particular body appearance, tagging some of the same previously mentioned posts with #weightloss hashtags and exhortations to #getfitordietrying. Furthermore, it must also be noted that, in the studied sample, both these body-positive and body improvement discourses were only present in photos of participants whose bodies were, for the most part, thin and toned, fitting the generally accepted beauty standards (Gill, 2007, p. 12), thus further reinforcing the concern that the body-positive movement on Instagram might become co-opted and depoliticized (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

These tangentially political discourses also emerged in the studied sample linked to ideas of *consumer activism* (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Although consumer activism can help to create greater cultural visibility for political and feminist causes (Rivers, 2017, p. 59), it often forgoes notions of systemic inequality, equating instead individual choices of lifestyle and consumption with broader political goals (Goldman et al., 1991, p. 336). There is a vague celebratory tone in some of the analyzed posts, expressed, for example, through mundane selfies with the users wearing "Girl Power" t-shirts. Other participants actively engaged with solidarity campaigns, as for example, a French-Algerian user showing her public support for the *Help Refugees* charity association by sharing a selfie wearing a #ChooseLove t-shirt (which sale profits revert to help those caught in the refugee crisis), as part of her fashion-oriented #outfitoftheday post. While others used their posts to, more broadly, praise and promote small businesses, sustainable fashion practices, or cruelty-free cosmetics.

Following the same contemporary postfeminist sensibilities, in these contexts, feminist can become a sort of vague "cheer word" that equates the business successes of one independent woman with overall female empowerment (Gill, 2016). In the analyzed posts, this seemingly celebratory feminist tone was occasionally employed as a way to celebrate the participants' professional successes and to assert their visibility in usually male-dominated professional fields, captioning photos of themselves as #femaledirector, #womenbehindthecamera, or #girldj.

These broad, tangential, but nonetheless political themes thus emerge in the midst of complex and sometimes even contradictory Instagram self-representational practices, embedded in everyday uses and Instagrammable aesthetics. These mundane self-representations exemplify how it is on the level of the ordinary that resistance to existing power structures and social inequalities are negotiated, expressed, and represented as an inseparable and concrete part of daily life.

Conclusion

Instagram has rapidly become central to many people's everyday uses of social media. The popularity of Instagram is shaping visual cultures, introducing new photographic practices and aesthetic conventions, thereby expanding the realm of what and who is considered *photographable* (Bourdieu, 1965). The creation of photographic self-representations is a central part of the everyday uses of Instagram, and a practice particularly associated with young women. As such, these seemingly mundane self-representations are imbued with social, aesthetic, and ethical values and conventions. They establish what is worthy of being photographed in a specific socio-cultural context. These Instagrammable conventions have thus the political potential to expand the realm of public visibility, granting both aesthetic and political value to moments and people otherwise unrepresented.

Instagram embraces a wide range of women as photographable, allowing for representations of femininities that are often absent in popular media. There is a sense of diversity and individual variation that can be recognized in the studied sample, including women from diverse geographical locations, racial and ethnical backgrounds, occupations, gender presentations, and so on. The means Instagram affords for self-representation have the potential to allow these women a greater sense of control and agency in how they wish to represent themselves and which aspects of their lives they wish to make

visible. This might have the potential to erode the hegemonic hierarchies through which women become publicly visible, but it might also contribute to personal empowerment, allowing women to assert their own worth of what is photographable in visual culture (Tiidenberg, 2018).

Furthermore, by embracing everyday aesthetics (Leddy, 2005), Instagram is also expanding the scope of photographable to seemingly mundane moments of women's everyday lives, which were largely underrepresented or devalued in both vernacular analogue photography and popular media, often relegated to the so-called women's genres (e.g., Hermes, 2003; Kuhn, 1984). These mundane self-representations allow young women to create an edited self (Marwick, 2013), emphasizing certain desired aspects of their personalities, showing off their achievements, and asserting symbolic cultural capital, thus engaging in a politics of status (Silverstone, 1994a, p. 994). These mundane moments of everyday life are often shown through the lenses of a specifically *Instagrammable aesthetic* (Caldeira, 2020), privileging those aspects of lifestyle and everyday experiences that will look good on Instagram and attract more likes.

Although rare, overt personal engagement with political themes and activities emerged in the studied sample, echoing fourth-wave feminist efforts (Maclaran, 2015; Munro, 2013) and emphasizing how self-representations can be used as a platform to showcase the personal-as-political (Aitken, 2017, pp. 6–7). Yet, more often tangentially political issues and themes seeped into everyday self-representation practices. These seemingly mundane self-representations, abiding by the same Instagrammable conventions and aesthetics, can thus become platforms for expressions of self-worth and the celebration of often marginalized identities. However, despite their political and feminist potential, these posts were also frequently marked by contemporary post-feminist sensibilities (Gill, 2016), having a vague tone of feminist celebration, while focusing mainly on questions of individual empowerment and personal choice, while disregarding wider notions of systemic inequality.

These self-representations take personal and sometimes seemingly mundane issues and place them on a wider public digital sphere, where they become embedded in broader conversations with hegemonic power structures. Social media practices thus blur the boundaries between private and public, the mundane and the political. As Instagram becomes increasingly embedded in our quotidian existence, we should strive to acknowledge the unavoidable messiness and complexity of social media and what it does to culture, critically exploring how seemingly mundane practices—like sharing selfies on Instagram—can become deeply intertwined with a broader sense of political potential.

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ORCID iDs

Sofia P. Caldeira https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7681-6952

Sander De Ridder https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3475-0523

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Author Biographies

Sofia P. Caldeira is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication Studies of the Ghent University. She is currently researching on a project titled "From Women's Magazines to Instagram: A qualitative analysis of photographic representations of femininity in the age of self-representation," funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia.

Sander De Ridder (PhD, Ghent University) is a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) at Ghent University's Department of Communication Sciences. His research interests include digital media culture, sexuality, and media audiences.

Sofie Van Bauwel is an associate professor at the Department of Communication studies at the Ghent University, with expertise in research on gender and media.

All authors are members of CIMS, the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies at Ghent University.